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TEXTmCommunity colleges today face the challenge of providing quality education under tight budgetary constraints. A tool that may help community colleges meet this challenge is the quality circle, a management technique borrowed from Japanese industry that is now gaining popularity among American managers. This ERIC Digest draws from the ERIC literature to examine the characteristics of quality circles and to describe actual examples of the use of quality circles at community colleges.

WHAT IS A QUALITY CIRCLE?

A quality circle consists of a small group of people who perform the same jobs or tasks. This group meets voluntarily, on a regular basis, to discuss problems, seek solutions,

and cooperate with management in the implementation of those solutions. Quality circles operate on the principle that employee participation in decision-making and problem-solving improves the quality of work. Through the circle, members generate mutual respect and trust as they work on solutions to common, on-the-job problems.

A review of the literature shows that quality circles have several defining characteristics (see References). First, participation in a quality circle is strictly voluntary. Second, members of the circles set their own rules and priorities and select the problems that are to be discussed. Third, decisions are made by consensus; open communication is encouraged and negative criticism is discouraged. Finally, quality circles utilize organized approaches to problem-solving, including brain-storming and cause-and-effect diagramming; persons who act as circle leaders need to be familiar with these and other participative management techniques. Ideally, then, quality circles are not hampered by members who are not personally committed to the process; in addition, the organized approach to problem solving prevents quality circles from holding unproductive rap sessions.

HOW ARE QUALITY CIRCLES UTILIZED?

Quality circles in industry have been known to increase productivity, improve quality, boost employee morale, and serve as a human resource development tool; these same benefits may be accrued in education. In fact, quality circles in community colleges have been used to solve problems in administrative developments (Ladwig, 1983; Moretz, 1983), and in student support services (Ladwig, 1983; Cohen, 1983). Examples of quality circle applications at the community college are described below.

CENTRAL PIEDMONT COMMUNITY COLLEGE. As part of a campus-wide effort to incorporate quality circles in college operations, Central Piedmont Community College (NC) established a quality circle at one of its off-campus learning centers. The circle, composed of the director and volunteer staff members, used brainstorming to develop a list of goals for the center, rank ordered those goals by priority on a decision grid, and drew cause-and-effect diagrams to determine why those goals aren't always met. In the course of this analysis, the quality circle participants determined that a better telephone system was needed to help the center achieve its objectives. Circle members listed the ways in which the telephone system undermined the center's efficiency, kept a log sheet for a month to document the occurrences and nature of those telephone problems, and developed recommendations for changes in telephone equipment and configuration. The quality circle not only solved the telephone problem, but also produced a net savings in staff time of about \$100 per month. Moretz (1983) details the accomplishments of this quality circle and reviews the administrative procedures used by Central Piedmont Community College to implement quality circles in all aspects of campus management.

MIDDLESEX COUNTY COLLEGE. Middlesex County College (NJ) turned to quality

circles in an attempt to improve the cost efficiency of Project COPS (Career Oriented Peer Services), a peer tutoring program that matches second-year tutors with high-risk, first-year students. Quality circles were deemed an inexpensive way to increase tutoring effectiveness and to help student tutors prepare for the world of employment. Two peer-tutor quality circles were established: one composed of peer-tutors from business-oriented disciplines, and one composed of peer tutors from the engineering program. The business-oriented circle focused on the overdependence of tutees on the peer tutoring staff; recommended solutions included a stronger emphasis on tutee note-taking, time management, attendance and other factors that are central to a student's self-reliance. The engineering-oriented circle concentrated upon improving campus awareness of the peer tutoring center through utilization of faculty announcements, student clubs, faculty advisors, and other means. Cohen (1983) provides further information.

LAKESHORE TECHNICAL INSTITUTE (LTI). The LTI Board of Education implemented a campus-wide quality circle project, because faculty, management, and support staff expressed a desire to improve work efficiency and to become more involved in campus decision-making processes. Two types of quality circles were implemented: management circles, composed of administrators, program supervisors, program coordinators and educational specialists, and nonmanagement circles, composed of faculty and support service staff. Each circle met to identify problems and to find solutions. Among other accomplishments, the management circles developed an idea/suggestion memo system, intramural sporting events for LTI staff, guidelines for recognizing staff service, and a "who's who/what's what" recognition program. The nonmanagement quality circles recommended the development of a computerized information system to assist faculty in record-keeping, work processing, and grading. Overall, the response to the quality circles project at LTI was favorable. Improvements in employee attitudes, the quality of instructional and support services, and the work environment itself were seen as the result of the project. Ladwig (1983) provides an indepth analysis of the project.

HOW ARE QUALITY CIRCLES USED IN THE CLASSROOM?

Although quality circles have their roots in industry, quality circles have a promise as a pedagogical tool that makes students responsible for their own learning and increases class participation. Two such applications are described in the literature, one at Valley Forge Military Junior College (Murray) and the other at the Pennsylvania State University (Hirshfield). Murray (1983) describes a quality circle made up of 12 students in an American History survey course. These students studied the purpose and operation of quality circles and used the quality circle method to determine the type and frequency of written assignments, the content of lectures, and the testing methods to be used. The students took a serious interest in managing the class and, in fact, opted for rigorous assignments. Among other decisions, for example, the quality circle decided to reduce the time devoted to lectures, to increase the time available for discussion, to

change the location of the class to facilitate discussions, and to use essay exams for grading. Murray feels that the students moved toward "a firmer, more scholarly approach" (p. 7). In addition, class participation increased from about 30 to 75 percent.

In a similar undertaking Hirshfield (1983) selected eight students from a large class in an East Asia history class to form a quality circle. Again, the decisions made by the quality circle members altered the course structure and content. Among other actions, the quality circle implemented the use of a daily outline, increased student participation in the selection of poetry and films used in the class, and urged the use of contemporary analysis to illustrate the use of course material to modern-day problems. After two years of experimenting with quality circles in the classroom, Hirshfield feels confident that they are a valuable academic tool; quality circles increase student familiarity with course material and provide students with valuable experience in decision making and problem solving. Both Hirshfield and Murray note that quality circles imbue students with a greater sense of purpose in the classroom and provide students with an enhanced sense of self-worth.

WHAT ARE SOME PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH QUALITY CIRCLES?

The number one reason for quality circle failure is inadequate training. A lack of understanding quality circle technique may cause management to be reluctant to initiate circles, act upon circle suggestions or, eager for easy solutions, may implement quality circles too quickly. Circle members may be unsure of their purpose, reluctant to believe that participation is truly voluntary or, may simply lose interest. As mentioned earlier, training in quality technique is necessary to keep the circle productive and to prevent gripe sessions. Furthermore circle implementation must be well thought out and introduced as an on-going process, and not oriented toward a single problem (Ladwig, 1983).

Quality circles in academia face special problems. Many academics view education as an intangible, and so, not applicable to the productivity-boosting techniques employed by industry. Furthermore, educators tend to emphasize individual achievement and personal importance, which may run contrary to group participation. Highly educated circle members tend to become over philosophical about the purpose of the circle and may hamper circle progress. Finally, the academic schedule is not particularly conducive to quality circles; end of term rushes and vacation breaks tend to disturb circle momentum (Moretz, 1983).

Though originally intended for industry, the quality circle clearly has uses in education. Community colleges seeking to improve employee and student morale through participative management techniques may well wish to learn more about the quality circle, its uses, and its effects.

REFERENCES

Further information on the applications of quality circles can be obtained through the small but growing literature on quality circles in higher education. This literature is accessible through manual or computer searches of the ERIC database; consult a librarian or contact the ERIC Clearinghouse for Junior Colleges, 8118 Math-Sciences Building, UCLA, Los Angeles, California 90024.

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